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AUTHOR Shwedel, Allan
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ABSTRACT

Basic assumptions regarding the process of identifying gifted children for special preschool programs are examined in light of traditional and contemporary definitions of giftedness. Uses and limitations of various identification techniques are discussed with an emphasis on approaches which are being used currently to identify gifted preschoolers. Given the recent trend toward enrichment and away from a total reliance on academic acceleration, it is argued that identification procedures should be geared to the child outcome goals spoused by individual preschool programs. It is pointed out that decisions regarding identification procedures should be made only after definitions and goals are established. (Author/SBH)

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A New Direction in the Identification of Children for a Preschool Gifted Program

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Allan Shwedel

University of Illinois

Identification is the process of selecting a subset from a population on the basis of some pre-established criteria. In terms of preschool programs for the gifted, there are two aspects of this terse description which need to be clarified. First, why are we trying to select a subset of the total population of preschoolers? Second, what criteria should we be using? To date most of our attention has been focused on criteria-related issues. The aim of this paper is twofold: (1) to point out that many of the so-called "problems" associated with the identification of gifted preschoolers stem from our preoccupation with criteria-related issues such as the predictive validity of our assessment instruments, and (2) to suggest that promising preschoolers can best be served by redirecting our attention to issues related to the goals of the identification process.

Historically, the identification procedures have been developed by psychometrists who were interested in individual differences and personality. Much of this work was based on the assumption that individuals possessed certain underlying abilities or traits. Since the traits were assumed to exist, the goal of the psychometrist was to develop reliable and valid measuring instruments. Intelligence testing is a good example of this approach to mental testing (Reigel, 1979).

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Work in the area of identifying gifted individuals also fits within this 19th century paradigm. The monumental study by Terman and Oden (1959) which demonstrated both the long-term stability of intelligence as measured by the Stanford-Binet and the apparent validity of the measurement instrument itself

led to a reliance on intelligence as an indicator of giftedness. Gallagher (1966) has pointed out that for many years superior intelligence as measured by standardized intelligence tests actually became the working definition of "giftedness."

As school systems began to offer programs for gifted students, psychometrists were called upon to provide valid alternatives to the Stanford-Binet as a means of filling slots in these special programs. In most cases, it was implicitly assumed that the special programs, usually some form of academic acceleration, were appropriate for the needs of the children who were labelled as gifted. From the psychometrists' perspective, their goal was to find an economical way to pinpoint those children who were gifted, i.e. those children who had high IQ scores. Somewhat to their surprise, researchers have found that parent ratings are an economical yet effective means of identifying children with superior intellectual ability (Ciha, Harris, & Hoffman, 1974; Jacobs, 1971). As long as academic acceleration is the major component of the special programs for the gifted, the traditional approach toward identification works reasonably well even at the preschool level (Ehrlich, 1978). In sum, the traditional approach to identification can be characterized as a search for those children who <u>are</u> gifted, with the criterion being high levels of intelligence as measured by standardized intelligence tests.

The concern with the traditional approach toward identifying gifted children has stemmed from two different sources. On the one hand, many people felt that "giftedness" included more than just superior intellectual functioning. In particular, creative ability was considered to be an important component of "giftedness." Guilford's work in the early 50's heightened interest in issues related to the identification of individuals with high levels of creative

ability (Guilford, 1950). The official position of the U.S.O.E. (Marland, 1971) on gifted and talented children reflects this trend toward a broader definition of giftedness. In addition to intellectual ability, the U.S.O.E. calls for the identification of children who show evidence of, or potential for, academic aptitude, creative thinking, leadership ability, and talent in the visual and performing arts. To say the least, the development of reliable and valid measurement procedures in each of these areas, especially for preschoolers, will go a long way toward keeping unemployment low among psychometrists for the next generation or so. As far as I know, aside from informal comments about musical prodigies, there is no evidence of long-term stability among any of the non-academic qualities listed in the U.S.O.E. statement. Most of the research in this area has dealt with measures of creativity and even here the questions of concurrent validity, let alone predictive validity, have not been adequately addressed (see, for example, Rekdal, 1977).

While the U.S.O.E. definition of giftedness is an improvement over the simplistic definition based upon intellectual functioning, it still is inadequate. Renzulli (1978) has pointed out that the U.S.O.E. statement lumps together both processes such as intellectual functioning and creativity, with products such as artistic talent and academic talent. In response to the shortcomings of the U.S.O.E. definition, Renzulli (1978) has proposed a coherent, logically sound definition of giftedness. He claims that three characteristics--above average but not necessarily superior levels of intelligence, creativity, and task commitment--are observed in most gifted adults. According to Renzulli, giftedness results when an individual has the opportunity to apply these interacting characteristics to real world activities.

Renzulli's definition is an improvement over the U.S.O.E. statement which

can have important implications for the identification of preschoolers for special programs. Nevertheless, from a psychometric perspective, there are still unknowns lurking in his definition. For example, do these three characteristics interact in an additive fashion or is the interaction better described by a more complicated mathematical model?

Aside from questions about the definition of "giftedness," serious concerns have been raised about the accuracy of traditional identification procedures. In part, this was an outgrowth of the furor over the misuse of intelligence tests with non-middleclass populations. Parents and educators have felt that many potentially gifted students were being overlooked by the traditional tests; that is, the rate of false negatives was unacceptably high. To combat this weakness, the use of multiple assessment procedures was advocated (e.g., Gowan, 1967; Storlie, Bellis, Powills, and Prapuolenis, 1978). Now it is commonplace for schools to use a number of assessment procedures which include intelligence tests, aptitude tests, creativity tests, parent ratings, teacher ratings, and peer- and self-ratings (Jenkins, 1979). In some cases, schools also vary entry criteria to accommodate children from various ethnic and socio-economic groups. While it is obvious that these complex procedures increase the opportunities for children to enter a special program, the predictive validity of these procedures has not been demonstrated. One serious limitation associated with most attempts to validate parent and teacher ratings is that the criterion variable is usually the score on an individually administered intelligence test (e.g., Borland, 1979; Ciha, Harris, & Hoffman, 1974).

At the preschool level, multiple assessment procedures are also used (Jenkins, 1979), but instead of offering more than one way to qualify for the

special program, these procedures often appear to be used in a sequential fasion, i.e., screening, via a referral or parent ratings, followed by an assessment on a standardized intelligence or achievement test (e.g., Bauer and Harris, 1979; Ehrlich, 1978).

There are some programs which do utilize multiple entry criteria such as the Seattle Child Development Center and the RAPYHT Program at the University of Illinois. The Seattle Child Development Center uses multiple assessment procedures, but once again these are designed to locate only intellectually superior preschoolers (Roedell & Robinson, 1977). At the University of Illinois we have developed a plan for identifying gifted and talented handicapped preschoolers which is sequential but which allows a child to enter our program if he or she demonstrates potential in any one of the 6 areas specified by the U.S.O.E. definition (Karnes and Taylor, 1978).

In general, the approach to the identification of children for preschool classes for the gifted appears to be focused on filling slots. While the predictive validity of these procedures has yet to be established, the assumption is that there are preschoolers who are gifted and our task is to find them. In the final section of this paper, I will suggest an alternative goal for the identification process which can provide a meaningful rationale for the allocation of limited financial resources for identification.

As noted above, the traditional assumption has been that "giftedness" is a characteristic which a person either does or does not possess. The U.S.O.E. definition broadens our conception of the range of characteristics or talents, but it is still a carry-over from the perspective of faculty psychology. More and more, educators are talking about talent potential and the need to nurture this potential so that it can be effectively utilized (e.g., Torrance,

1977). If we accept Renzulli's perspective that giftedness results from the application of the individual's abilities to real-world activities, then given the optimal interaction of intelligence, creativity, and task persistence, giftedness will emerge as the individual acts on his/her environment. If I understand Renzulli's perspective correctly, it bears an interesting resemblance to some of Piaget's writings on the process of intellectual development (Piaget, 1971). In terms of the identification of preschool aged children, Renzulli's definition may be particularly useful. Instead of searching for the elusive entity of "giftedness" among children who have had only limited time to interact with aspects of their environment which can result in socially valued products, e.g., the creation of a new painting style or the invention of a useful machine, etc., we can justifiably focus our search on children who show potential for such future accomplishments.

As a starting point, I would suggest that potential is evidenced by preschoolers who stand out from their peers in any affective, cognitive, or motoric skill area. By skill area, I am referring to activities which require the child to apply his/her capabilities to mastering relatively complex tasks. While these children may not grow up to become gifted, the fact that they excell under certain conditions suggests that they could benefit from a well-designed preschool program. Under these circumstances, the task of an educational enrichment program is to provide opportunities for selected children to develop their potentialities within a socially meaningful context, and the goal of the identification process is to find the optimal match between children and the special preschool program. Initially, the identification question is: which children do best in the special preschool program? The answer needs to be determined empirically for each community and each special program. For

example, if a preschool program is primarily one of acceleration, most likely intellectually advanced 3- and 4-year-olds would gain more from the program than highly creative 3- and 4-year-olds. However, if the preschool program were geared to enhancing divergent thinking, it may be that children with moderate levels of creativity and high levels of intelligence gain more from the program than children who already show high levels of creative thinking.

If the goal is to match children with a special preschool program, one way to establish the predictive validity of the identification process is to demonstrate that "selected" children benefit from the special program more than "non-selected" children. Of course, the utility of this approach to identification is based on an important assumption. One must assume that the program is specifically geared to the needs and capabilities of only a certain group of preschoolers. If the program is equally effective with all preschoolers, then there is no way to validate the identification procedures used to select the target group. Yet, it is important to realize that if the program is equally effective for all preschoolers, there is no reason to go to the time and expense to carry out the identification process.

To improve the quality of service provided to preschoolers who exhibit potential for giftedness, we must be able to match the strengths and weaknesses of individual children with the strengths and weaknesses of specific preschool programs. Existing identification procedures could still be used, but selection criteria may need to be adjusted to account for data which indicate the relative degree of program effectiveness with different groups of preschoolers.

Of course, it would be easier to continue to offer academic acceleration for children who are identified as intellectually superior, but as more preschool programs begin to offer enrichment activities, those who are responsible for

the identification process should prepare themselves for the new tasks which they will be asked to perform.

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